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ABSTRACT

This pilot study examined attitudes toward play and how play is facilitated among early childhood teachers, administrators, and college educators. Classroom observations, interviews, and questionnaires were used to identify attitudes toward the value and relevance of play for early childhood development and education, respondents' knowledge base on play theory and research, prevailing views on the relationship between play and cognitive and literacy development, the way play is incorporated into programs for young children, and the relationship between socioeconomic status, culture, education, and ethnicity with attitudes toward play. Initial findings indicated that almost all the respondents valued play for young children but differed in their definitions of play, its developmental and educational consequences, whether play was considered an essential preschool educational component, and what the teachers' role should be in children's play. Teachers' attitudes toward play seemed to stem from their professional training, their work with children, and their own childhood experiences, which reflected their own ethnic and cultural group membership. There appeared to be gaps between current research and academic thinking about play and current practice in the field, especially with respect to the relationship between play and the development of symbolic, abstract thinking and literacy. Overall, findings suggested that early childhood professionals held a range of perspectives on play reflecting differences in knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices, which were rooted in differences in personal, cultural, and educational experiences. (KDFB)

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Play in Early Childhood Development and Education: Issues and Questions

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"Play is being involved, play is learning, it is a part of learning . . . a growing and learning process."

"I feel play is okay, but time should still be set aside for learning because when you go to elementary school, you know, there's not going to be any play."

To be "a facilitator, to observe the children, not enter in . . ."

"I need to be involved in the children's play, that's the key."

—Views on play and the teacher's role in play from two Head Start teachers

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Play is a complex, elusive phenomenon that has been much studied but is still incompletely understood. Nevertheless, play has long held a central place in child development theory and practice, generating a rich body of theoretical and empirical knowledge. Currently, there appear to be both uncertainty and disagreement in the field of early childhood concerning the developmental significance and educational value of play, particularly play in institutional settings. Views on play range along a continuum. At one end, there is the conviction that play is the primary—or the *only*—

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"developmentally appropriate" means by which young children develop and learn. At the other end is the belief that play is essentially amusement and recreation but that it plays no role in children's development, learning, or education. Among those who value play, there is disagreement about the role of adults in children's play; some regard play as a sacrosanct activity that should be left entirely to children's direction, while others consider it an opportunity for teachers to interact and instruct. These differing perspectives on play intersect with two other concerns prevalent among early childhood educators today. The first is a perceived sense of pressure to make preschool and kindergarten programs more "academic," more like elementary school, and, by implication, less playful (Klugman and Smilansky, 1990; Glickman, 1984; Christie, 1991). The second is an increasing awareness among educators that child development knowledge and practice, once assumed to be universal, are, in fact, deeply rooted in local and specific cultural beliefs, values, and experience (Delpit, 1988; Rogoff, 1990, 1993).

Play: Work in Progress

Erikson Institute, on behalf of the Four-College Consortium, recently completed an exploratory pilot study on how play is perceived and valued and how it is used and facilitated among a small group of early childhood teachers, administrators, and college educators in the Chicago area. The impetus for this study emerged during a year-long consortium seminar on play organized by Edgar Klugman at Wheelock College between 1993–1994. Early in the seminar, participants shared concerns about the fragile status of play in early childhood education, and many felt that it was important for the consortium to make a statement about its view on the importance of play. However, as our discussions progressed, we realized that we needed more information on the status of play in the field, on the beliefs, values, and practices of early childhood teachers and administrators, and on the educators who prepare professionals at the college and university level. This led to the pilot study in which we developed the methodology for a larger research project to be undertaken by the consortium.

The pilot study has made us realize the enormity and

complexity of conducting research on play in early childhood education—it is a substantial and complex endeavor. It is substantial because of the centrality of play in early childhood theory, research, and practice. It is complex because practitioners' knowledge, beliefs, and values are deeply rooted in personal and cultural experience and may be difficult to access. Differences in how play is perceived and valued may indicate either or both of the following: a lag between new knowledge about play research and current practice and/or differences in cultural goals and values as a significant part of the developmental and educational process. That is, concerns and criticisms about play in early childhood education may reflect unfamiliarity with the wealth of recent research on play and/or cultural perspectives and values that do not see play as having a central role in early development, particularly in cognitive aspects of development. Different perspectives on play may be the result of a communication gap if educators are *not aware* that their own or others' cultural beliefs and values are likely to affect perceptions of play. We believe that it is important to understand the range of perceptions on play and the reasons for them in order to foster communication among college educators, program administrators, and classroom teachers.

Play Theory and Research

An enormous amount of research and theory on play has emerged in recent years, much of it exploring links between play and various aspects of children's cognitive development. Some of this research has looked at possible links between play and early literacy development (Christie, 1990, 1991; Dyson, 1986, 1990; Gundlach, 1992; Gundlach, et al., 1985; Isenberg and Jacob, 1983; McLane and McNamee, 1990; Pelligrini, 1985; 1991; Vygotsky, 1978); play and symbolic development (Fein, 1975, 1979, 1981; Piaget, 1962; Vygotsky, 1978; Wolf and Gardner, 1979); and play and language development (Bruner, 1983, 1986; Garvey, 1984, 1990; Garvey and Berndt, 1977; Haight and Miller, 1993). Much of this and other recent developmental research has focused on play in different cultural and educational settings, often from a Vygotskian or sociocultural perspective (Berk, 1994; Farver, 1993; Fernald and O'Neill, 1993; Gaskins, 1994; Göncü and Kessel, 1984; Haight and Miller, 1993; MacDonald, 1993;

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Nicolopoulou, 1993; Rogoff, 1990; Rogoff, et al., 1993; Roopnarine, et al., 1993; Schwartzman, 1978; Zukow, 1981).

Unlike earlier research and theory reflecting either a psychoanalytic or a Piagetian framework, research conducted in a Vygotskian/sociocultural framework emphasizes the role of the social and cultural contexts. This means that the role of other people in the child's world—parents, siblings, teachers, peers—will be an important factor in analyzing how children play and what they gain from their play. A sociocultural perspective also implies that cultural tasks, values, and beliefs affect how play is marked, perceived, and understood and that the developmental consequences of play may reflect how it is valued and supported in a particular setting.

Practitioners' Beliefs

The study of knowledge, beliefs, and values about educational goals and methods, including the appropriateness of play in the early childhood classroom, is complicated. As Pajares points out, the beliefs of teachers and other practitioners are likely to be deeply rooted, hard to ascertain, and even harder to change. However, for these very reasons, they have a powerful impact on practice and are worth investigating:

> Attention to the beliefs of teachers and teacher candidates can inform educational practice in ways that prevailing research agendas have not and cannot. The study of beliefs is critical to education precisely because, as Kagan (1992) concluded, "the more one reads studies of teacher belief, the more strongly one suspects that this piebald of personal knowledge lies at the very heart of teaching" (Pajares, 1995, p. 85).

Furthermore, a sociocultural context suggests that we cannot assume that we understand what other teachers, administrators, and teacher educators know and believe or what they *should* know and believe, nor can we dismiss differing views on play as "misguided" or "uninformed." As Kessler observes,

> What appears to be a debate between those who are well-informed by current research in child development and those

> who are not is, in reality, a debate between individuals who hold different values about the purposes of schooling, what counts as legitimate knowledge, and presumably the nature of the good life and the just society (Kessler, 1991, p. 193).

We must, in other words, acknowledge that we may not know or understand what other practitioners know or believe because all child development knowledge is "local" in the sense that it reflects specific cultural contexts (Delpit, 1988; Rogoff, 1990, 1993). This means that such knowledge is, at best, an uncertain and ambiguous base for practice because it raises the difficult question of *whose* knowledge and beliefs about child development will be given priority in early childhood settings (Jipson, 1991; Stott and Bowman, in press).

Research Questions

In our pilot study we devised methodology (classroom observation of teachers and interviews and questionnaires for teachers, administrators, and college educators) to begin answering the following questions: What is the range of views on the value and relevance of play for early childhood development and education among teachers, directors, and educators? What is the range in the knowledge base of play theory and research among early childhood teachers and administrators? In particular, what are the prevailing views on the relationship between play and various aspects of cognitive and literacy development? What is the range of ways play is incorporated and implemented into programs for young children? What is the overlap between different groups' perspectives on play and prevailing research in the field? If there are differences in beliefs, attitudes, and practices relating to play, what are they, and how are they distributed? Finally, do different perceptions of play and its developmental and educational purposes relate to differences in SES, culture, education, and ethnicity? Answers to these questions should facilitate discussions on play within and among groups of early childhood professionals and should help in understanding where and how recent research on play can most effectively be communicated and utilized.

Research Methods

Classroom Observation

Our protocol is designed to describe the range of children's pretend play activities and teacher involvement in pretend play and to compare teachers' stated beliefs and attitudes toward such play with their classroom practices. This form focuses on (1) the availability, variety, quantity, quality, and condition of play materials; (2) how classroom materials and space are organized for play; (3) the daily schedule of activities, including the length of time allotted for "free play;" (4) the kinds of interactions that occur between teachers and children during pretend play; (5) the ways teachers encourage or discourage children's pretend play; and (6) the ways and extent to which teachers participate in children's pretend play. We found that observations also make it possible to query teachers during interviews about specific classroom events and interactions. (For example, we observed a child crawling around the classroom pretending to be a cat. After several minutes of this play, the teacher directed him to come to the art table and draw. We later asked the teacher about this, and she explained that this child often pretended to be a cat as a social overture to other children and that she wanted him to know he could play other roles as well; thus, we learned that what had seemed to us an interference in a child's play was, for this teacher, an indication of her concern for the child's self-esteem.)

Interviews

We asked about play from a variety of perspectives, including what respondents remembered about play from their own childhood and their educational training, their past experiences in the field of early childhood education, as well as what they thought about their most recent, day-to-day play-related experiences working with children in the classroom or with supervising and training teachers around play. In developing this interview, our chief objective was to ascertain respondents' "true," personal beliefs about play, which may differ from what they have been told by administrators or educators (see Pajares, 1992). In addition, we sought to understand practitioners' goals for the care and education of young children and their views on working with parents on the issue of

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play. In order to construct a quantitative measure of beliefs and practices to supplement the qualitative interview data, we developed a structured questionnaire that employed a five-point, forced-choice Likert scale for respondents to fill out independently after the interview. The questionnaire was designed to differentiate among beliefs about the importance of various activities in an early childhood program, particularly play activities.

Preliminary Findings

Based on responses to the interview questions in our pilot study, we have begun to develop categories for interpreting the qualitative data. (This is an evolving process, and we expect other categories will emerge as more data are collected and analyzed.) Some of our initial categories are based on the ways teachers define play, their perceptions of the developmental and educational consequences of play, their views of the adult role in children's play, their goals for children's development, and the sources of their knowledge and beliefs about play. All of the respondents in our small sample, with the exception of one Head Start teacher, seemed to value play for young children. However, they differed in their definitions of play and its developmental and educational consequences, and in whether or not they considered it an essential preschool educational component. They also differed in their opinions about whether or not teachers should participate in children's play, and, if so, how they should do so. Based on our interviews, teachers' beliefs about play appear to stem not only from their professional training and work with children but also from their own childhood experiences. These, in turn, would suggest that beliefs and practices relating to play may vary considerably among different ethnic and cultural groups.

For example, one African-American Head Start teacher described the evolution of her ideas about play as follows:

> [At the beginning] I was like some of the parents now—"All my child does is just play at school." You know, you have to get an understanding of what is play, and when I was a parent in Head Start, I didn't understand that. Not until I entered the classroom was I able to see with my own eyes what they were learning at the sand table or the water table. And going

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> back to school, receiving more child development classes, that has really given me a great understanding. . . . And I worked with some really great teachers, models, wonderful models.

The director of a Chinese-American day care program told us that teachers' childhood experiences affect their beliefs and practices more than their professional training does:

> China and Hong Kong are the two places my teachers are from. The way you grow up is the way teachers believe, more so than any training; [it] kind of takes over. . . . Unless teachers have had a lot of training here [in the United States], and unless they were brought up here with their parents, [some of the harder roles for teachers] have to do with extension of play and conversation. . . . Since our teachers didn't have that kind of training [or] upbringing, [they] go back to . . . how [they've] been brought up and the significant learning experiences in [their] lives.

Finally, our data also suggest there are gaps between current research and academic thinking about play (Dyson, 1986, 1989; Gundlach, 1982; Pelligrini and Galda, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978) and current practice in the field. This seems particularly true with respect to the possible relationships between play and the development of symbolic, abstract thinking and between play and the development of literacy.

Our preliminary findings suggest that early childhood professionals maintain a range of perspectives on play in the early childhood classroom that reflect differences in knowledge, values, beliefs, and practices. These are rooted in differences in personal, cultural, and educational experience. We believe these merit further investigation because play is so intimately tied to notions of what is developmentally and educationally "appropriate" for young children. The findings from such an inquiry will be particularly important for those who train and supervise early childhood classroom teachers.